

7. Cappella del Campus delle Scienze, Parma.

del mondo accademico. O meglio, la monumentalità intesa come impressione di grandiosità, solennità, imponenza. Questi edifici sono effettivamente "monumenti", ma nel senso etimologico del termine. Anche la loro sola presenza in questi centri del sapere è significativa. Consentono alle comunità cristiane ivi presenti di riconoscersi in un edificio, in ciò che esso rappresenta. Nei campus universitari

– città nella città o città "altra" avulsa dal contesto urbano – esse fungono effettivamente da simbolo, richiamo religioso che a prescindere dalla effettiva qualità architettonica risulta inequivocabilmente riconoscibile. È forse un caso che proprio nella città di oggi, sempre più multietnica e multiculturale, si avverta l'esigenza di costruire chiese nelle università, fuori o dentro le città?

«A STRUCTURE [...] IN WHICH THE CHURCH CAN ORIGINATE».

THE DON BOSCO COMMUNITY CENTRE
BY MARC DESSAUVAGE IN KESSEL-LO, 1968-70

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All'indomani del Concilio Vaticano II, l'arcidiocesi belga di Mechelen-Bruxelles si trasformò in un terreno fertile per iniziative progressiste finalizzate ad avvicinare la Chiesa alla vita quotidiana. Uno degli esperimenti più radicali espandendo a dismisura vicino a Lovanio. Concepito come un campo base cristiano piuttosto che come una parrocchia meditazione personale, all'istruzione e ad incontri informali. Cresciuta attorno a una "strada" interna collegata alle zone circostanti, questa infrastruttura mirava a integrare in maniera organica le celebrazioni religiose nella routine

Sono due i filoni di pensiero sviluppati nel corso di ricerche precedenti e applicati al caso belga¹. In primo luogo, l'idea per cui un edificio (religioso) funzionale non richiede soltanto un architetto di talento, ma anche un finanziatore illuminato e istruzioni chiare in grado di spiegare agli utenti come fare propria la nuova infrastruttura. Infatti, nonostante il talento e la notorietà di Dessauvage, il suo progetto non sarebbe mai stato realizzato senza il sostegno morale e finanziario dell'agenzia diocesana responsabile della costruzione della chiesa, la Domus Dei. Inoltre, un processo altamente partecipativo, avviato con l'aiuto di assistenti sociali, si è rivelato essenziale al fine di avvicinare i parrocchiani al nuovo edificio. Un secondo filone di pensiero si incentra sul fatto che, nel periodo di massima attività del Centro Don Bosco, le celebrazioni che vi si svolgevano attiravano anche fedeli che abitavano a una distanza di 50 chilometri, mentre alcuni abitanti del quartiere preferivano ascoltare la messa in una chiesa vicina. Ciò fa emergere un tema molto dibattuto all'epoca: ha ancora senso parlare di parrocchie legate al territorio in tempi di crescente mobilità sociale? La chiesa parrocchiale deve rivolgersi esclusivamente a coloro che abitano nei dintorni o piuttosto a una comunità allargata di anime che la pensano allo stesso modo? Per quanto riguarda il caso belga, questi interrogativi mantengono intatta la loro rilevanza nella realtà odierna.

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¹ S. Sterken, *A House for God or a Home for his People? The Domus Dei Church Building Programme in the Belgian Archdiocese* [Una casa per Dio o una Casa per il suo Popolo? Il programma per la costruzione della chiesa Domus Dei nell'arcidiocesi belga], 1952-1981, "Architectural History", vol. 56, 2013, pp. 391-429.



1. Marc Dessauvage, Don Bosco community centre (1968-70), general view (Photograph © the author, 2014).

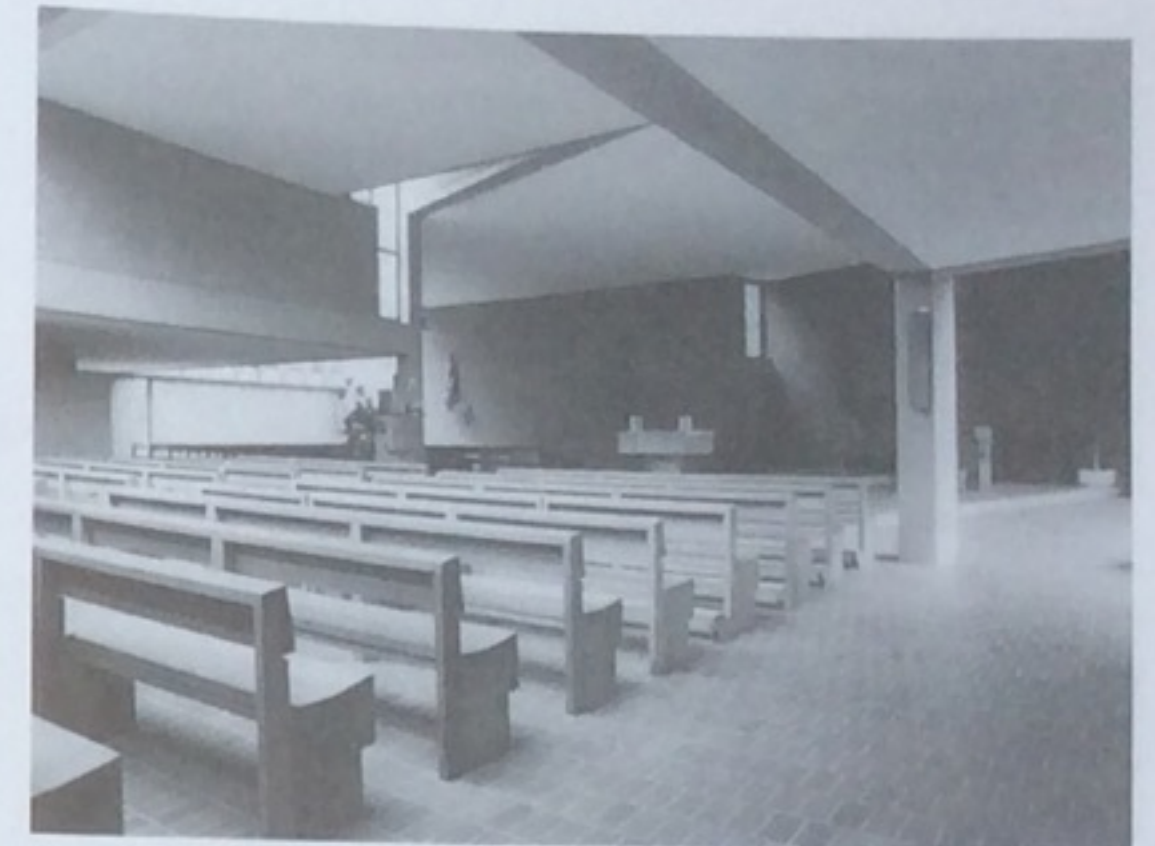
In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the Belgian Archdiocese Mechlin-Brussels became a fertile ground for progressive initiatives aiming at bringing the Church more in tune with contemporary society. One radical such experiment was carried out at the Don Bosco

parish in Kessel-Lo, a sprawling working-class neighbourhood next to Leuven² (fig. 1). It was transformed into a Christian "base community". The project started in 1965 on initiative of the newly appointed parish priest Modest Campforts. In his view, Christian spirituality had more

² The origins and evolution of the Don Bosco parish between its foundation in 1960 and 1986 (retirement of vicar Modest Campforts) are well described in Pieter De Bruyne, *De geschiedenis van de Don Boscoparochie te Kessel-Lo (1958-1988): een pilootparochie in woelig vaarwater* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Leuven, 2006). Additional research was carried out in the Dessauvage archives (KADOC, KU Leuven); the archives of the Archdiocese Mechlin-Brussels; the Don Bosco parish archives, Kessel-Lo. I am indebted to the current vicar, Jet Wauters, for sharing his experiences with me during an interview on February 14, 2014.

to do with an ethics of solidarity and community than with liturgical rites or devotion³. His leftist ideas contrasted markedly with the conservative spirit in the adjacent parishes and found resonance amongst progressive Catholics intellectuals in the wider region. Typically for the idealistic and anti-authoritarian spirit of the times, considerable effort was put into giving the local community a say in the administration of the parish, while lay people and non-believers were also invited to partake in an attempt to transgress political and ideological boundaries. Quite paradoxically perhaps, this «slow but steady growth towards something that is at present clear to no one» was organized very rigorously according to the method of community organization and followed up closely by a professional social worker⁴. The third part of the project concerned the replacement of the provisional church building – built with scrap material from the 1958 Brussels World Fair – by a modern, multifunctional structure. Rather than a typical church, it was to be a tool in the realization of the aforementioned spiritual, pastoral and social goals.

Aware of the hefty responsibilities associated with such an undertaking, Campforts left the initiative for the new structure with *Domus Dei*, the church building agency of the Archdiocese⁵. Founded in 1953, *Domus Dei* had evolved from a fund-raising vehicle to an active agent in the renewal of Catholic space in Belgium⁶. With the full support of Cardinal Suenens, it promoted the idea that a



2. Marc Dessauvage, St. Paul's church, Westmalle, 1965 (Photograph © Filip Tas/Fotomuseum Antwerpen. Used with permission).

church building ought to be an instrument in community building rather than a monumental shrine for devotion. If worship was to become embedded within a broader social practice, then there could be no question of a separate building for liturgical use alone; nor should its architectural expression differ from that of "ordinary" public buildings. Moreover, given the fall-back in church attendance, the multi-functional use of church infrastruc-

³ M. Campforts, *Waar ik werd aangeraakt, ging ik en ga ik* (Sd, sl), 19, 30.

⁴ The project was coordinated by Jan Das – a social worker of some renown within the catholic milieu. The project was elaborated in different phases between 1968 and 1973 and followed up by Das' students, which resulted in a series of reports that enable one to closely follow the ups and downs of the project. See (in chronological order): J. Budel, *Het activeren en betrekken van de bevolking van de Don-Boscoparochie te Kessel-Lo bij de inhoudelijke en organisatorische uitbouw van een gemeenschapscentrum* (Heverlee: Centrale hogeschool voor christelijke arbeiders, 1969); M. Iliaens, *Opbouwproject in de Don Bosco-parochiegemeenschap te Kessel-Lo* (Brussel: Hoger Instituut voor maatschappelijk en cultureel werk, 1970); J. Van Boven, *De verdere begeleiding van het project van samenlevingsopbouw in de Don Bosco-gemeenschap te Kessel-Lo* (Heverlee: Centrale hogeschool voor christelijke arbeiders, 1971); G. Verstele, *Het begeleiden van een vormingsproces en het animeren van een project aan de basis in de Don Bosco gemeenschap te Kessel-Lo* (Heverlee: Centrale hogeschool voor christelijke arbeiders, 1973).

⁵ M. Campforts, *Waar ik werd...* cit., p. 77.

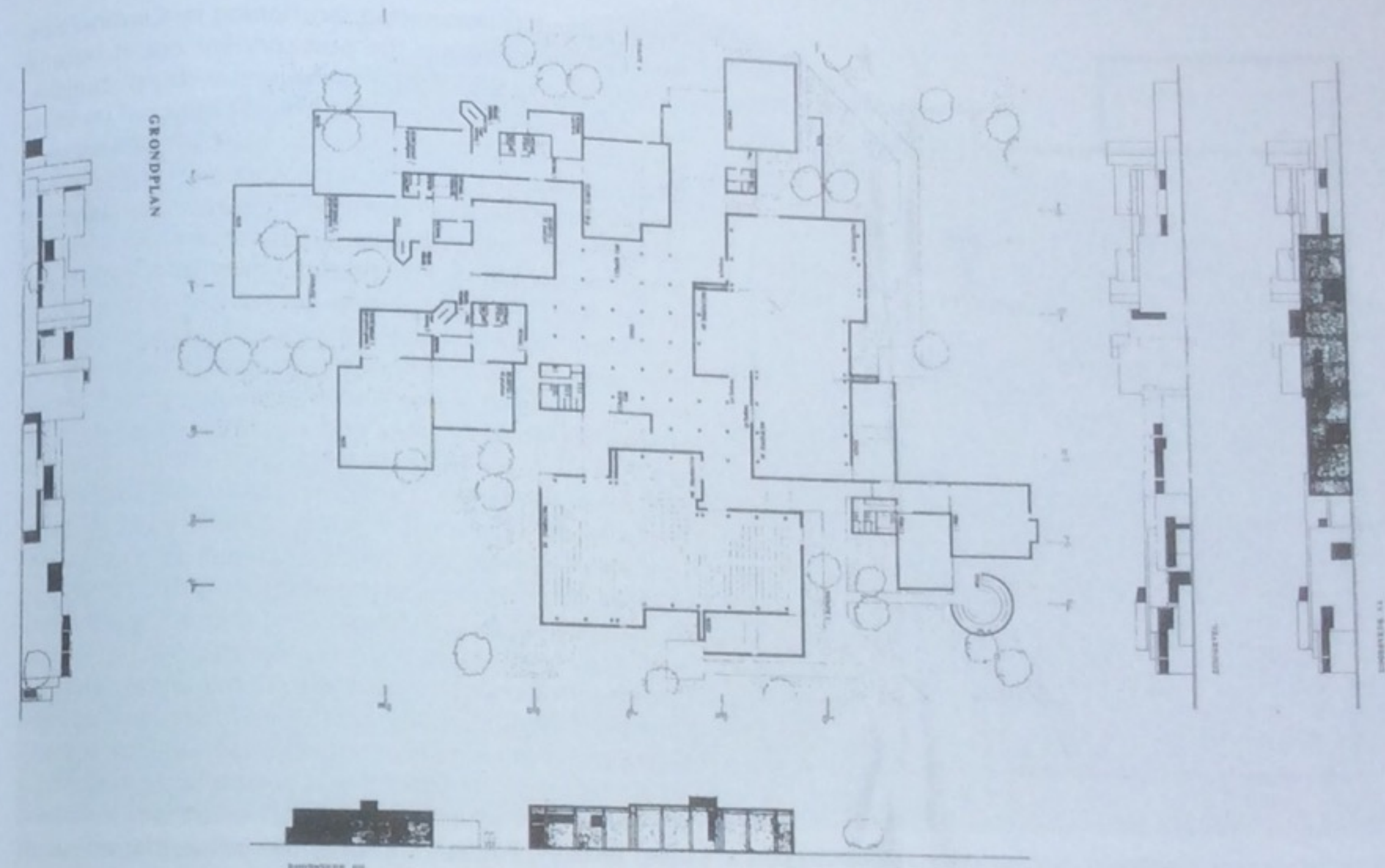
⁶ On *Domus Dei*, see Sven Sterken, *A House for God or a Home for his People? The Domus Dei Church Building Programme in the Belgian Archdiocese, 1952-1981*, "Architectural History", vol. 56, 2013, pp. 391-429.

ture had simply become an economical necessity. *Domus Dei's* leadership seized the opportunity at Kessel-Lo to put these ideas to the test. To this effect, it hired Marc Dessauvage, the most talented and progressive church builder of his generation in Belgium⁷. Made of simple but carefully detailed brickwork, exposed concrete and unpainted wooden joinery, his churches were referred to as "woonkerken" ("dwelling churches") – a typification which stressed not only their formal resemblance to his residential projects, but also their domestic feel (fig. 2). In the second half of the 1960s, Dessauvage's designs started to integrate a great diversity of functions exceeding the strictly ecclesiastical. This became particularly clear in his entry for the 1966 competition for a new church at Overvecht, a new extension of Utrecht (Holland)⁸. Organized by the Dutch episcopacy, the competition aimed at expressing the idea that the world the Church was associated with, was in no means different from the world of dwelling, consumption and leisure time. Thus, the church ought to be interpreted more largely as «a meeting place for various religious groups, the expression of social ties between these groups, and their (physical, social) integration in the neighbourhood». Rather than a building, the contestants were invited to design «a structure [...] in which the Church can originate»⁹. Taking this almost literally, the author of the primed entry (a three-dimensional structural framework organically interwoven with the orthogonal pattern of area) stated that the church ought to be «no longer a creation but a creative pro-

cess»¹¹. The second prize was awarded *ex aequo* to Dessauvage who proposed a collection of multifunctional halls of various sizes grouped around a covered "agora" (fig. 3). Connected to the surroundings by means of several pedestrian routes, his entry possessed an eminently urban quality. Nevertheless, the jury felt that it remained too autonomous to fully integrate Church and world.

Dessauvage recycled several ideas of his Overvecht entry for Kessel-Lo. His design comprised for example a multi-functional hall (seating 600) and an array of smaller rooms for personal meditation, instruction and informal meetings. All these spaces were devoid of any fixed furniture and clustered around an "internal street", an artery of communication and activity that organically linked the celebration area with the other communal areas, as well as with the more meditative and private area of the weekday chapel, with the various service areas (sacristy, cloakroom, toilets, kitchenette), and finally with the environment outside (fig. 4, 5). The church building thus became a global architectural programme capable of accommodating all kinds of human encounter: social, cultural and festive. This programmatic expansion was not really new however. Already in the 1930s, in France, the *cité paroissiale* included accommodation for the priests and housekeepers, parish office(s), classrooms for catechism, a parish hall, rooms for youth movements and sometimes even primary schools, a cinema and sports fields. Similarly, in Belgium, many new churches of the inter-war period

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3. Marc Dessauvage, entry for the Overvecht competition, 1966 (Source: "Tijdschrift voor Architectuur en Beeldende Kunst", 35 (1968), p. 19).

included spaces for secular use. The novelty in Kessel-Lo resided in the notions of *flexibility* and *appropriation*; rather than separate rooms or buildings, sliding partitions were now used to accommodate a maximum variety of activities within a single spatial envelope: liturgical celebration on Sundays, an assembly of local

associations on Saturdays, or individual prayer and catechism in small groups during the week (fig. 6).

Right away from its consecration in 1970, the Don Bosco centre became a beehive of activity¹². A great many progressive Christians and adherents of the then popular "liberation theology" found their way to Kessel-Lo to

¹² In the Dessauvage archives at KADOC, we found a letter from Campforts dated 13 February 1969 which is revelatory in this respect, as the latter summons the architect to comply with at least some of the requests by the parishioners. In the same letter, Campforts regrets the fact that the centre's design was not part of the community project. At this stage in our research, it is not clear however to what extent Dessauvage was to blame for this.

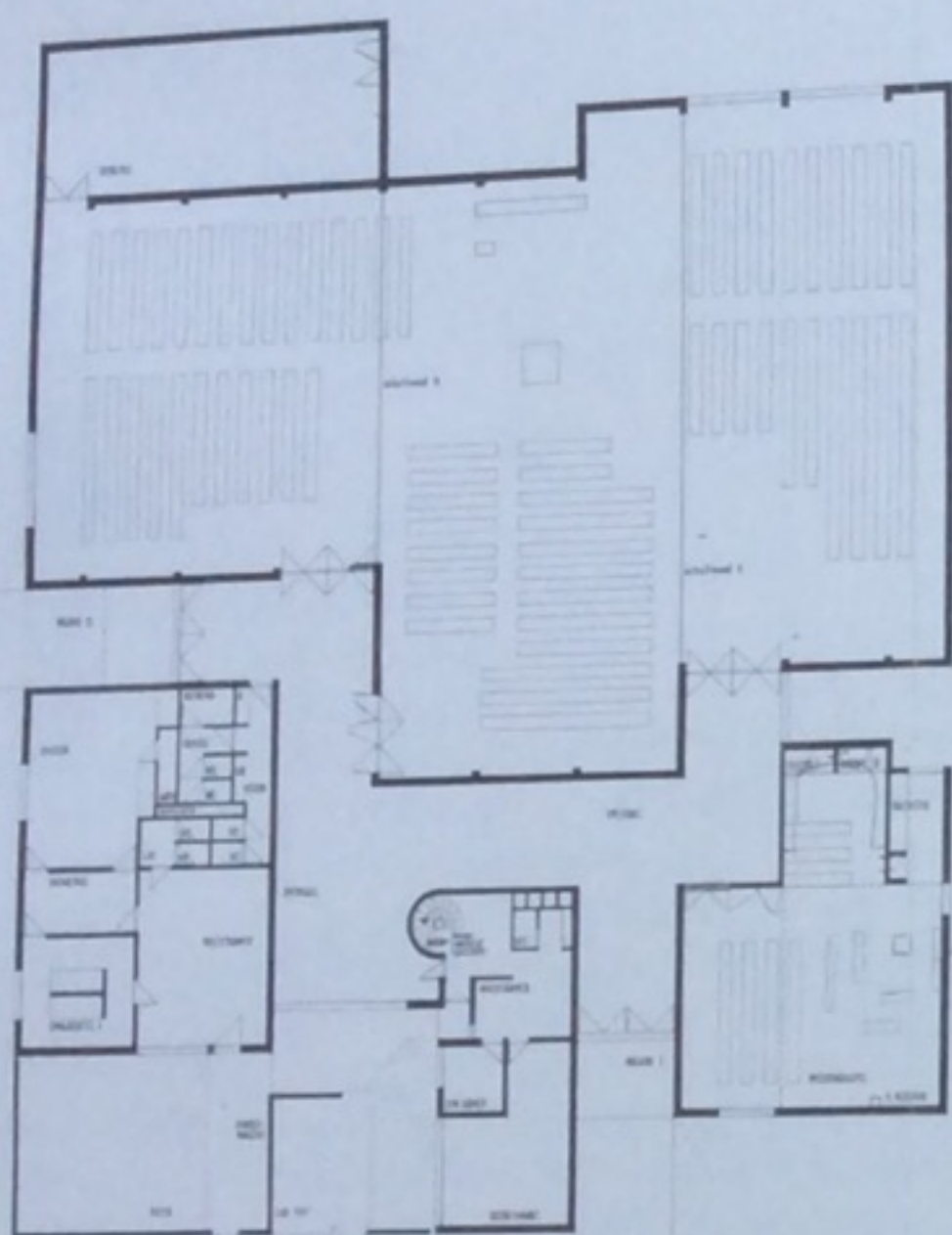
⁷ On Dessauvage, see G. Bekaert and L. Verpoest, *Marc Dessauvage 1931-1983* (Antwerp, 1987). Dessauvage realized such churches in Ezemaal (St. Aldegondis, 1962-1965), Willebroek (St. Jozef Ambachtsman, 1962-1964; Holy Cross, 1963-1967), Vosselaar (St. Jozef, 1960-1965), Aarschot (St. Rochus, 1960-1965), Westmalle (St. Paul, 1964-1967), Holsbeek (St. Carl, 1964-1969), Herne (Our Lady, 1966-1969) and Jette (St. Joseph, 1964-1969). For a documentary study, see T. Broos, S. Van de Voorde, J. Vermeir, *Marc Dessauvage en de evolutie van het kerkgebouw* (Masters dissertation, University of Ghent, 2005). For a contextualizing of Dessauvage's contribution; see A.-F. Morel and S. Van de Voorde, *Rethinking the Twentieth-century Catholic Church in Belgium: the Inter-relationship between Liturgy and Architecture*, "Architectural History", 55 (2012), pp. 269-297.

⁸ The competition was organized by the Dutch Interdiocesan Commission for Church Building together with the Catholic art periodical "Tijdschrift voor Architectuur en Beeldende Kunst" (TABK). See presentation of the results in TABK, 35 (1968), p. 19.

⁹ Quoted from the competition brief, in TABK, 35 (1968), pp. 19, 459.

¹⁰ *Idem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 461.



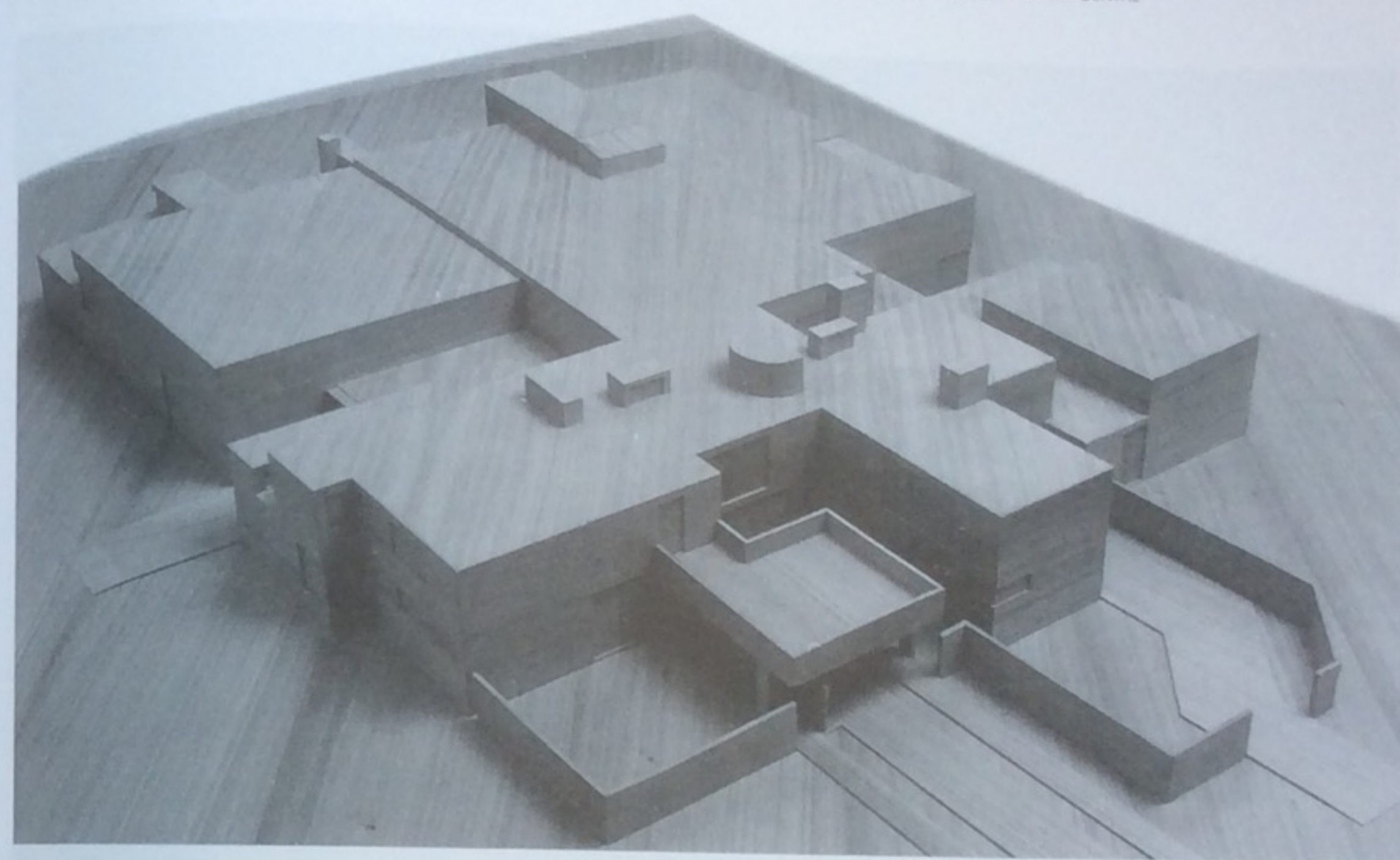
PLAN GELUKVLOERS

4. Marc Dessauvage, Don Bosco community centre (1968-70), ground floor plan (Source: Archives of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels).

debate critical issues in contemporary society. This leftist atmosphere culminated on Christmas Eve 1973 with a performance of *Mistero Buffo* by Dario Fo – a piece condemned by the Vatican as blasphemous – in the church space.

This feat, and its unexpected sanctioning by Cardinal Suenens, illustrated how in the post-conciliar era, it became increasingly unclear what a parish and a church building were exactly about. Indeed, the more traditional parishioners complained that during mass, often more time was spent on discussing the atomic threat than Eucharistic Prayer. Others argued that dogmatic Catholicism had been replaced by an even suspicious socialist-humanist doctrine. Along the same lines, many parishioners found it difficult to view their church as a mere instrument in the service of pastoral community work. Moreover, the shared responsibility for the multifunctional hall became the source of many a conflict; more than once during Holy Mass on Sunday, the smell of beer and cigarettes reminded the worshippers of the previous evening's party. In a moment of despair, vicar Modest Campforts even wrote that «many memorable church services at Don Bosco have not been held there thanks to, but *despite* the new building...»¹³. As he stated further, in order to keep up with the running costs, the centre had no choice but to rent out space for all kinds of events, the pastoral relevance of which was often unclear¹⁴. This brings to light the fundamental ambiguity of parish complexes like Don Bosco: they illustrate the Catholic Church's ambition not only to cater for the spiritual welfare of the faithful, but also to occupy a central position in their social life and foster a Catholic influence upon society¹⁵. Frédéric Debuyst, the influential editor of *Art d'Eglise*, had already warned against this in 1966: «the Christian ghettos that might originate around such centres are the very negation of the universal and missionary spirit of the Church»¹⁶. This is indeed what happened here: while some drove more than fifty kilometres to attend Sunday services at Don Bosco, it was found that the more moderate or traditionalist parishioners attended Mass in the adja-

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5. Marc Dessauvage, Don Bosco community centre (1968-70), model (Photograph © Paul Stuyven. Used with permission).

cent parishes of Vlierbeek and Blauwput¹⁷. In fact, contemporary sociologists had already pointed out well before that in an era of social mobility and growing individualism, such parochial "nomadism" would soon become the rule. Parishioners would no longer be united by territorial

proximity but by a shared ideological perspective¹⁸. In this respect, rather than condemning it as a ghetto for progressive Christians, one could claim that Don Bosco prefigured a new type of parish based on intra-personal affinity and individual ethics rather than place of residence.

¹³ M. Campforts, *Waar ik werd...* cit., p. 83.

¹⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁵ On the phenomenon of the *cité paroissiale*, see A. Le Bas, *Des Eglises missionnaires pour une banlieue déchristianisée: l'exemple de l'île de France*, in C. Frémaux (ed.), *Architecture religieuse du XX^e siècle. Quel patrimoine?* (Rennes, 2007), pp. 145-146; F. Debié and P. Véro, *Urbanisme et art sacré: une aventure du XX^e siècle* (Paris, 1991), p. 297.

¹⁶ F. Debuyst, *Architecture moderne et célébration chrétienne*, Collection de pastorale liturgique n. 74, 1966, p. 46.

¹⁷ P. De Bruyne, *De Geschiedenis...* cit., p. 144.

¹⁸ In the early 1960s the Belgian sociologists of religion François Houtart and Jean Rémy pointed out that the creation of new parishes by splitting up those that had become too large failed to take into account the ever increasing mobility of contemporary urban society, which resulted in an almost structural dissociation between places of residence, work and leisure. Furthermore, most suburban dwellers had become emancipated and relatively affluent individuals, making their own choices based on personal preferences and affinities. This resulted in a growing "parochial nomadism" as many worshippers attended Mass in a different parish from their own. See F. Houtart, *L'Aménagement religieux des territoires urbains*, "La revue nouvelle", 2 (1958), pp. 517-527; J. Rémy, *Conséquences socio-culturelles de la concentration urbaine*, "Social Compass", 7.4 (1960), pp. 307-311; J. Rémy, *Les institutions ecclésiastiques en civilisations urbaine et industrielle*, "Social Compass", 13.1 (1966), pp. 39-52.



6. Marc Dessauvage, Don Bosco community centre (1968-70), main hall after refurbishment (2014), (Photograph © the author, 2014).

GEOGRAFIE DEI LUOGHI SACRI URBANI: IL CASO DEL QUARTIERE DI SAN SALVARIO A TORINO

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Relationships between sacred places and the city have acquired, in the post-council dimension, characteristics that can be captured only by pushing beyond the consideration of individual architectures or types. They are the relationships between the spaces and communities that come into contact which, in new suburbs and the consolidated city, create physical and symbolic geographies that are not immediately clear.

The reflection we propose, inspired by research still in progress, in collaboration with the University of Turin, starts from a double track in contemporary religious experience in the Christian context, which rests in turn on a double spatial system. On one hand there is a uniform fabric, consisting of the parishes, territorial community centres which are increasingly in trouble in themselves and increasingly seen as a place of access to a particular service. On the other hand there is a polar system made up of diversified places such as monasteries, ecumenical centres and basic communities, that often share the urban dimension with the parishes and around which liquid communities gravitate, which are established around common interests and sensitivities. In two different strata, the uniform one and the polar one, they stay in contact and the double system is repeated in the microcosm of the individual parish as much as in the inter-religious dimension resulting from the urban concentration (examples can be found in districts such as San Salvario in Turin and Northern European cities).

The parish, like the meeting places and living places in the various declinations of the Christian community, are seeing the practices around which they were originally built being extinguished; they are permeated by dynamic, variable experiences and, at the same time, new spaces and places are taking on the role of meaning the presence of the sacred in the present day.

This results in the confirmation of the difficulties in operating according to a typological and morphological taxonomy consolidated by the approach of the historical evolution of spaces and types, and the need to interpret a multitude of unstable customs: it is the dimension of time that breaks in, attributing different functions and meanings to the interior and exterior spaces of architecture according to a certain event.

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